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A MOTHER'S SACRIFICE; OR, WHO WAS GUILTY?

By Christine Faber, Author of "Carroll O'Donoghue."
CHAPTER I.
The rigid corpse lying on the table in the morgue was a ghastly sight—a loathsome sight, as the bright morning sun shone on its gory hair and made sickeningly visible the great gash that disfigured the countenance.

The eyes were only half closed, but the lips were firmly compressed, and, despite the ugly cut that extended the whole length of the left cheek, the face wore an expression of defiance as if even death had not terminated the passion which had raged in the last moment of life. The form was well and powerfully made, the limbs strong and graceful, and the constitution evidently had been one that, with regular living, might have promised to its possessor many years of vigorous health.

There were few stains on the black shroud, but the black shroud was sufficient to indicate that there could have been a struggle before the death blow. In age the man might have been thirty, but it was difficult to judge; for at first sight his well-shaped head with its crisp black curls clustering thickly round his ample forehead seemed to mark him a very young man, but a longer look into the gashed face would make one decide that he must be in the very prime of life.

He had been found in the early morning of that day lying upon the sidewalk dead, evidently murdered. There was no clue by which to trace the perpetrator of the deed; not even a trace of blood beyond the immediate spot where the crime had not been plundered, for a handsome watch and a solitary ring had been found on the body. Nor was his portmanteau touched, but it contained nothing by which his identity might be discovered.

He had been borne to the morgue and placed on one of the tables between a dripping form taken from the river an hour before, and an unknown person who had died in the hospital, on the previous night, of delirium tremens. But there was something about the murdered man that attracted the most attention, and the people who visited the morgue during the day, whatever their motive, found their eyes, repulsive as was the sight, turning repeatedly to the ghastly, gashed face.

Relatives claimed the remains of the drowned man, and a friend was found for the wretched creature who had died in his drunken fit, but no one claimed the corpse of the murdered victim. All day long he lay with stray rays of the bright sun gleaming upon him, and no one came to identify him.

"It's a queer case," said one of the employees, in reply to the question of a visitor, "the doctors say it wasn't the cut as killed him, but a blow he got on the breast. I guess he's a stranger in these parts; no owner 'll be found for him till the description of him gets to other cities."

When it was nearly evening a woman, unaccompanied, sought admission to the morgue. She was very plainly dressed, and so heavily veiled that not a feature in her face could be discerned. She was slight and girlish in form, and her manner seemed to indicate shy youthfulness. Her voice was tremulous, but singularly sweet, with a peculiar intonation that once heard was seldom forgotten.

ing to her questioner with slight alarm in her manner—"there is no tie between us. I have not come to claim his body; only to see if he is the same whom I knew."

"But you may be able to throw some light on this strange affair?"
"None, none." I have not seen him for a long, long time, and with singular nerve for a timid seeming creature like her, she bent to the loathsome gash as if to peer into its bloody depth, and she lifted the curls from the forehead as if searching for some other murderous mark.

"Is this all?" she asked, pointing to the cut when she had finished her survey.
"No, ma'am; there are bruises on the breast as if he was struck by some powerful body."
Her voice became animated.
"Which killed him—the cut, or the blow?"

The man looked sharply at her before he replied.
"Why, the doctors says it was the blow as done it, but that looks ugly enough to do it," and he pointed to the gash.

The woman sighed and turned to depart.
Her questioner had all the smartness sometimes accredited to men in his position, and having strong inducement in the reward which he knew would be forthcoming for official correctness in this case, he contrived to intercept her. In a few moments she found herself confronted by other officials.

"One of them, though suspicious of her agitation, could not help pitying her; she seemed so young, and despite the plainness of her dress, so much above those of her sex who usually visited the place. He said, kindly:
"This case is a very strange one and it requires rigid investigation. As yet not a single clue has been found to tell by whom, or for what reason, the murder was committed, or even to reveal the identity of the murdered man. You say that you have known him. Then you will be able to tell us something about him—not now, child—but at the proper time, before proper authorities, giving a sidelong glance at the map who had brought about the meeting."

"All we require at present," he continued, "is an assurance that we can find you whenever we may want you to tell what you know of this unfortunate man, and that assurance we must get by detailing some one to accompany you home in order to ascertain your correct name and residence. Tomorrow perhaps some light may be thrown on this singular affair."

The girl was sobbing with all the wild abandon of passionate woe. She started men glancing significantly at each other, but no one spoke, until the first wildness of the burst had spent itself.

As if in a moment of forgetfulness she threw up her veil, disclosing one of the loveliest and saddest countenances the world-hardened men had ever beheld: it was so delicately fair, with large eloquent eyes—now mournfully eloquent because of the tears with which they were filled—and every feature, from the intellectual forehead down to the small, sensitive mouth, regular and perfect; short dark curls had strayed beyond the confines of her bonnet, and lay in becoming rings upon her forehead.

not resist the imploring glance of her mournful eyes.
"That will do, miss; I'll question anybody you like, and I won't say anything about why I'm doing it."
She put out her small, white hand, and caught his rough, bronzed one, and to hear again the grateful "thank you," which fell from her lips, he felt he would be willing to go away without asking any questions at all.

A trim, tidy little maid opened the door.
"Oh, Miss Margaret!" she said, "your aunt has been asking for you."
The girl thus addressed looked significantly at her strange companion, but she made no remark until she had brought him with the maid, whom she had motioned to follow her, into one of the parlors opening from the resplendent hall. The heavy gilt chandelier was partially lighted, but the man had hardly time to observe fully the magnificence of the apartment, for she who had been addressed as Miss Margaret, leaning against the door which she had softly closed, said hurriedly:
"Tell this man, Annie, what my name is, and all that you know about me."

The maid was so astonished at the command that she only stared with wondering eyes and open mouth.
The officer stroked his chin a second time in perplexing thought.
"Answer," said Margaret a little impatiently.
"Your name is Miss Margaret Calvert—but I don't know what else you want me to say about you."

"How long have you lived in this house?" questioned Miss Margaret.
"Two years."
"What have you learned about me during that time—in a word, who am I?"
But a wondering stare was the only reply.
"Let me question her, Miss," said the man, who at last had recalled his senses.

"Who is this young lady?" pointing to the form beside him.
"I told you her name once, what more do you want to know?" seeming to divine with the smartness which is usual to some of her class, that questions were being asked which it was not desirable for her to answer.
He assumed his most stern official tone.
"Is Miss Margaret Calvert a daughter of the lady of this house?"
"No, sir," answered a little by his stern voice; "she is a niece, so far as I know."

"Be quick, please," said the sweet voice at his side; "I fear my aunt is waiting for me."
He gave a puzzled look from her to the maid, stroked his chin a third time, and with a muttered:
"Hang it! I can't do it anyhow," turned to depart, saying:
"That will do for the present, Miss."
She accompanied him to the door, opened it for him, and waited on the stoop until he was half way up the block. Once he turned; her mournful eyes haunted him.

"Hang it," he muttered again; then remembering that he had not even ascertained the name of Miss Calvert's aunt, he cursed his stupidity; wished he had never been detailed for the duty, and finally compromising with his conscience by returning to one of the adjoining houses, he learned on inquiring from a servant, that Miss Calvert was the niece of a Madame Bernot, and that the latter had no family save a son who was traveling.

The maid had remained to close the door when the lady should return from the stoop.
The young lady strove to be calm; but the weakness and the terror of the past hour had returned to her, she clutched the oaken balustrade for support, and sank on the lower step of the stair.
The maid hurried to her with much concern in her manner.
"I do not need you," Miss Calvert hastened to say; "I am better now—leave me."
Prudence and compassion whispered to the servant silence upon what she had witnessed and heard; but her woman's curiosity, which she thought might be gratified if others assisted to discover the import of the strange affair, and her love of gossip that de lighted to speak about it, even though so doing would be vain to unravel the apparent mystery, prompted her to tell about it in the servants' hall; but though each of the domestics commented, and offered various conjectures, not one of them thought of tracing the slightest connection between the strange murder of which the evening papers were full, and lovely Margaret Calvert.

Miss Calvert had grown calm at last and had returned to her room that she might put off her out-door garments before attending her aunt; but she had not quite finished bathing her face in order to remove the tear stains, when another summons came from the invalid's apartment.
It was a spacious airy room, just above the parlors and luxuriously furnished; but the object which first arrested and attracted attention was a large, peculiarly constructed chair that reclined on its soft cushions, its use was at once apparent from the peculiar castors, the adjustable back ready to prop the occupant or to form a couch. Now, its back was turned almost upright, and the form that reposed against it seemed to fill entirely its ample space—so large a form that it was difficult to think it could be a woman until the face was seen, and that, with its regular, feminine features, though they were slightly sharpened by severe physical suffering,

told at once of a noble and devoted nature. It was such a face as one sometimes meets in rare old paintings, not beautiful because of perfection of feature, but because of the singular expression which the countenance wears, the indescribable something that lingers about it and that is remembered long after the color of the eyes and the hair is forgotten.

Such was the face of this invalid. Few looking into her eyes thought of their color, but few forgot their expression. For seven years she had occupied this chair, leaving it neither by day nor night. It was so constructed that she could rest on one side while her cushions were being arranged on the other.

For seven long weary years she had not been moved save as they wheeled her chair about, and lifted her in strong arms while they changed her soft white robes; but this last motion—caused as they sought to make it—caused her intense agony. The lifting of a finger or the moving of a foot was accompanied with such pain that she preferred never to leave her invalid chair.

Her countenance, even apart from the lines which suffering had worn in it, indicated her age to be fifty or more; but her gray hair was abundant and glossy, and, free from cap or restraint of any kind, clustered round her head in curls that many a youthful beauty might have envied. She had never been known to repine at this dire visitation of God—not even a hired attendant had ever heard her murmur save when a throb of pain unusually severe had wrung from her a half stifled cry.

It was this wonderful endurance and resignation which gave to her character so noble a cast, that it was reflected in her appearance, and invariably impressed beholders with a sense of her exalted virtue.
"Is Margaret coming?" she asked of the attendant whom she had sent to summon her niece, in a voice that had nothing of the querulousness of sickness in it—clear, sweet-toned, and possibly as strong as it had been in her healthiest days.
Margaret entered and went at once to the invalid chair.

"You have been very long, child—your walk must have extended itself much further than usual."
"Perhaps it did, aunt," was the reply, accompanied by a kiss on the invalid's forehead; and then she proceeded to do the numerous nameless little things incidental to a sick room, moving about in so noiseless a manner that it was soothing to watch her.

But the poor invalid's eyes could not follow her very far, for the head was unable to turn without great pain.
"It was cruel of me to leave you so long when Hubert was not here to take my place," said Margaret, when, having finished her little services, she knelt beside the sick woman, gently rubbing the poor hands that could not help themselves. The soft pressure of another's fingers upon them seemed to allay the pain that at times started violently in every joint.

"She stumbled at last; one of those infant-like dozes into which she sometimes fell, and which were the only sleep she knew even in the longest nights."
Margaret motioned to the attendant, a tall, stout, kindly-faced woman, to take her place, and rising softly she went from the room.
On the hall above whither she had gone, she was confronted by a white, startled face. It peered over the balustrade at her, and shrank from the hand she extended.
"There is nothing to fear," she whispered.

It came toward her then, to where the faint light from a lowered gas jet beamed shadowingly upon it.
It belonged to a young man whose age could have been little more than a score of years; but there was a manliness about the slight straight form that might have belonged to thirty. A glance at his face told of the near relation he bore to the invalid below, but his features were not characterized by the peculiarly beautiful expression which marked hers.
Yet his eyes had the same look—the same look, despite the wild, startled expression of his whole face now.

morgue—I recognized him only too surely. But they say it was a blow on the breast that killed him."
He shook his head, while she continued:
"They found him in the street early this morning, but no one knows him, nor has a single clew been discovered to tell who did the deed. Be brave, Hubert."
"Yes," he said, turning away from her, "I shall be brave until the torture caused by remorse for this deed, and the secret fear of detection, lead me to desperation—until my life snaps under the strain. Tell me, Margaret, turning suddenly back to her, "would it not be better to give myself up at once—to face it all, the cell, the scaffold perhaps, the gaping multitude, my mother in her coffin from the blow, and our name a thing of scorn for all time? but"—with a sudden change of voice—"I cannot die—oh, God! I cannot die!"

He covered his face with his hands.
"No, Hubert, no!" she passionately asserted, though in her secret soul she was struggling with her own scrupulous sense of duty, which told her that the course he suggested was the only right one. "The yielding of your life cannot restore the one you have taken—rather live and offer penitential acts and works of charity for his soul."
"Works of charity," he repeated, taking his hands from his face and smiling bitterly; then, as if impelled by some sudden and alarming thoughts he asked quickly:
"Can you keep my secret? are you sure that you will never betray me?"
"Betray? oh, Hubert!"

There was such keen reproach in her tones that he could hardly bear it.
"I did not mean that you would denounce me, Margaret, but have you thought how heavily the burden of my confidence may press upon you—how in the future when you may become desperate from its weight, some unguarded word may fall unintentionally from your lips; have you thought of all this?"

"It is not necessary to think of it," she answered mournfully, "it is enough that you have trusted me—sooner would I die, than betray that trust by a look."
"Are you willing to take an oath to that effect—will you solemnly swear never to betray me?"
"She replied, with her head bowed, and her voice more mournful:
"If you trust me so little as to require an oath—"
"It is not that I do not trust you," he answered passionately; "but my fears have made me cowardly and unreasonable—to know that you have sworn, will be an assurance to me, and it may be an assurance to you. Will you take an oath, Margaret?"

She bowed her head, and repeated after him the solemn words which bound her to inviolable secrecy. Seeing her intense pallor, and noting the convulsed agitation of her form, he continued: "It is your own fault to be thus burdened—you sought my confidence, you employed me for it when I returned this morning. You must pay the penalty of your guilty knowledge—you must help me keep my wretched secret, even though it should burn into your soul, as it is now scorching, shriveling mine."
She did not answer.

"Poor child!" he went on, and his tone assumed a tenderness befitting the comforter of a penitent. It was as if she were the perpetrator of some dark guilt and he was showing her its horrible consequences; detailing the black remorse in his own soul as if it were a description of what was passing in hers, and his face came back to its own expression, and his attitude became more erect, for his guilty heart revealed in the knowledge that another would suffer from the weight of his unhappy secret—he would have companionship in his hidden misery.

Still she made no reply, and he, as if to rouse her from her apparent lethargy, began tenderly to stroke her hair.
She started from him.
"You shrink from the murderer's touch," he said bitterly, "though you have consented to share the murderer's secret suffering."
She shook her head.

"Margaret," he resumed in a pleading tone, "a while ago you bade me be brave—you alone can assist me to be so—nerve yourself and I shall cast aside my fears—my plans are laid; safe ones, I think, since you have consented to bear part of my wretched burden, do not go back, nor falter now—help me, oh, help me, Margaret!"
The last words were a despairing cry that came up from the very depths of his sick heart. He extended his hands to her, and his face betrayed more than it had done yet, the insupportable anguish under which he labored. His cry, his look, raised all the compassion in her nature—flinging aside every thought save that it was in her power to aid him, to comfort him, she grasped his outstretched hands, and said tremulously:
"Fear not! I am strong again—use me as you will, I shall never falter more in your service."
He drew her unresistingly to a chair, and seating himself beside her, began to talk calmly of his future course.

"And, now, tell me about the stranger who accompanied you home this evening," he said.
She repeated without reserve what had taken place in the morgue.
His face darkened, and he shuddered.
"How near you came to giving them a clew," she answered, almost